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ABSTRACT

Programs for the elderly are rapidly becoming part of adult education programs. Such programs often use the methods and assumptions associated with andragogy (an approach to adult education advocating that instruction of adults should encourage self-directed learning) and use learning objectives related to life experiences and problems. Although some of these assumptions might be incorporated into educational programs for the elderly, learners in this age group often have unique assets and liabilities that should be tapped. Perhaps "geragogy" would be a better approach to use with such learners. Geragogy emphasizes the guided learning of older adults and considers their special needs. The older adult population--for example--has a lower level of formal education than the rest of the population, is composed largely of females, has changing social interaction patterns, and suffers from a number of health problems. To meet these needs, the geragogy approach would stress instructor-directed learning, supervised decision making, and person-centered activities. This approach is especially suited for speech communication instruction because the skills of listening, speaking, problem solving, and social interaction are fundamental to the needs of the elderly. (FL)

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GERAGOGY: INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS FOR ELDERS

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GERAGOGY: INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS FOR ELDERS

Adult education has expanded in the last decade to include programs for elderly persons. Such programs often utilize the methods and assumptions associated with andragogy. This concept of adult education, which was developed by Malcolm Knowles, advocates that instruction of adults should encourage self-directedness, emphasize experiential learning, and utilize learning objectives related to life experiences and problems.[1] Although some of the assumptions of andragogy might be incorporated into educational programs for the elderly, learners in this age group often have unique assets and liabilities as learners. For these reasons, this essay develops a learning concept designed for elders; it is a specialized type of adult education called geragogy.

The word geragogy comes from two Greek root words--"geras" means "old age" and "agogus" refers to "guiding" or "leading."[2] Thus geragogy emphasizes the guided learning of persons in old age. Although this concept has been suggested by European educators,[3] instruction of the elderly in this country utilizes methods and curricula associated with adult education. In proposing geragogy as a useful and specific concept of instruction for elders, this essay (1) demonstrates that the elderly are a unique population with specialized learning needs, (2) concludes that these unique needs require new teaching methods, and (3) operationalizes these conclusions into curricular goals and objectives.

The Population of Elders

Many gerontologists question the use of age as the decisive variable for classifying persons as "old" since many persons over sixty-five are

vigorous, alert, and active. Despite the relevance of this objection, the elderly do have special needs just as children and adolescents do. Research about aging indicates that persons over sixty-five are unique in their level of education, their population density of women, their changing social interaction, and their declining health. Such characteristics must be considered in the development of geragogy as a learning concept.

Education. The elderly are under-educated in relation to the rest of the population. Among those over sixty-five, only 35% hold high school diplomas and over 3 million are functionally illiterate.[4] Many have language, monetary, and attitudinal barriers to education. Regardless of those learning impediments, elders are eager and capable learners "who surpass younger learners in verbal and integrating ability."[5] Elders need to continue to learn even into old age because they need to know how to adapt to both radical and gradual changes resulting from retirement, death of loved ones, new living situations, physical impairments, increasingly complicated technology, and lack of mobility. The dilemma is evident: the elderly are undereducated and, at the same time, they have an impelling need for education to promote their adaptiveness and to enhance their life satisfaction.

Sex. The elderly are most often single or widowed women. For example, one out of every ten Americans is over sixty-five and 60% of this group are women, resulting in over 23 million elderly women. From this age group, over half of the women are widowed and one-third or 8 million live alone.[6] These statistics about old women assume added significance because they are poorer than old men, having an average annual income of three thousand dollars; they are less educated; they have less work experience; and they lack coping skills for managing an independent lifestyle.[7] While old women constitute the largest segment of the population to be served by

educational programs, they also have the greatest economic, social, and personal impediments to education. Educators of elders must account for the unique needs of elderly women by understanding the traditional roles of women and the assets and liabilities associated with these roles such as their needs for greater autonomy and opportunity.

Sociability. Atchley concludes that elderly men and women are more dependent, more insecure, more passive, and less power-oriented than persons in other segments of the population.[8] These conclusions may be affected by secondary characteristics of the population such as the large number of women, poorer health, lack of mobility, economic segregation, and social stereotyping. Nonetheless, persons over sixty-five do socialize less than other adults. Another dilemma is evident: although elders socialize less effectively than other persons, they are the ones who benefit most from such interaction. Aldridge emphasizes that socialization in adults contributes to skills for coping behavior, self-expression, interpersonal relationships, and leadership opportunities.[9] Obviously, programs of geragogy should promote learning that improves skills in social communication.

Physical disabilities. Even among those elders who experience good health, physical changes inevitably occur during old age. Among those changes are losses of energy, failing eyesight, impairments in hearing, lower reaction time, and lapses in short-term memory. Elders can counteract these physiological limitations with their psychological assets: they have better organized experience which can provide a wider context into which new learning and knowledge can be assimilated; they know themselves better; they tend to perceive learning as useful; and they benefit from sociability provided by group learning.[10] The methods and objectives of geragogy must account for the physical limitations of elders by a slower pace of

instruction, increased repetition of information, flexible scheduling of time, and carefully selected goals and teaching aids.

These unique qualities of the population of elders justify geragogy, that is, specialized instruction for old persons. Geragogy differs from andragogy in several ways. First, geragogy is designed for smaller and a more homogeneous population of learners. Whereas andragogy is a method for all adults over the age of eighteen with a variety of learning needs, geragogy meets the needs of a specific population of adults who are under-educated, composed mostly of women, lack sociability, and experience physical limitations. Second, geragogy stresses the skills elders need to cope with change and increase their enjoyment of life. This contrasts with andragogy which offers instruction associated with job change, career development, or personal enrichment. Third, geragogy emphasizes specific personal skills needed by elders; andragogy stresses self-directed and problem-centered learning.

Although geragogy differs from andragogy, these concepts share some common assumptions about lifelong learning. Both perspectives agree that learning should take place throughout the life cycle of a person, utilize the experience of the learner, includes both instrumental and expressive objectives, use experiential activities rather than lecture methods, and provide instruction outside of the classroom setting.

Teaching Methods of Geragogy

Methods include both the assumptions and strategies used by teachers and learners in developing an instructional program. The methods of geragogy differ from those of andragogy. Andragogy involves self-directed learning, participative decision making, and problem-centered activities

(pp. 37-54), while geragogy stresses instructor-directed learning, supervised decision-making, and person-centered activities.

CONTRASTING METHODS

ANDRAGOGY	GERAGOGY
Self-directed Learning	Instructor-directed Learning
Participative Decision Making	Supervised Decision Making
Problem-centered Activities	Person-centered Activities

Directed Learning. Geragogy instructors supervise the learning of elders after a thorough assessment of their needs determining their educational backgrounds, their physical and psychological strengths and weaknesses, and their specific interests. Instructors then use these results to develop goals, objectives, and curricular programs. Direction is needed because elders may lack the educational background and the practical knowledge that would enable them to design programs suited to their needs and capabilities.

On the other hand, andragogy stresses self-directed learning in which adults assess their own competencies from a comparison between their current abilities and their desired goals (p. 42). Since adults have pragmatic goals and know what they need to learn, they can direct their own learning. But elders are often undecided about their goals and unfamiliar with learning options so they need the supervision of informed instructors.

Andragogy encourages self-directed learning because its population is "able to make their own decisions" and "manage their own lives"; they need

to be independent and autonomous (p. 40). Elders lack both the confidence and the independence of other adult learners because of life changes which produce anxiety and uncertainty about who they are and how they should act.[11] This uncertainty and weakened self image of elders suggests the need for more supervision from instructors.

Both the methods and objectives of geragogy assume a narrower focus than other adult education programs. Consequently, instructors require specialized knowledge about the physiological, psychological, and sociological conditions of old age so that they can understand the assets and liabilities of these learners. Background in gerontology will assist instructors in program development, recruitment of learners, and the adoption of appropriate teaching methods and objectives.

Decision Making. Geragogy involves supervised decision making in which instructors suggest goals, objectives, curricula, learning formats, and activities. This type of guidance differs from the participative decision making of andragogy. Instead of learners designing their own goals and programs with the approval of the instructor (pp. 42-44), instructors develop the program and use feedback and input from elders to modify it. This does not mean that elders have no role in planning their education but it does place them in subordinate rather than coordinate role in decisions about learning processes.

This excerpt from a conversation which I had recently with an elderly woman in a retirement center exemplifies the lack of background of elders about educational programs. In conducting interviews with elders in the community, this type of response is common.

Instructor: Elsie, do you want to attend our learning group on Tuesday afternoon?

Elsie: Go back to school! Me! No, I don't think so.

Instructor. The learning groups are not like traditional classrooms; there are no tests, no textbooks, no formal assignments.

Elsie: What do people do then?

Instructor: We share experiences about our past and future, our interests, our problems in getting along with people here and in our families.

Elsie: Why would you want an old lady like me from Nebraska in such a program?

Instructor: Because all of us learn from each other and we can help someone else by our ideas and experiences.

Such responses point to the elders' lack of information and their need to assume a subordinate rather than a coordinate role in decisions about their learning.

Participative decision making is recommended for adults because they have a great deal of experience which is a "tremendous resource for their own learning" (p. 34). Elders are more long-lived and more steeped in tradition than younger adults but they also can use their experience. However, the experience of elders is not always an asset. Moody notes that "older people bring to the learning situation a lifetime of personal experience that can be not only their greatest resource but also their greatest stumbling block."[12] Experience impedes learning if it discourages change; it expedites learning when it is adapted and applied to new situations. Elders can be restricted when they think of their experience as part of "the good old days," decide their way is the only one, or refuse to modify their beliefs and behavior even though situations have radically changed. Instructors can maximize the experience of elders by focusing on it as the content of learning activities such as in contributions for discussion, data for life reviews or oral histories, and resources for social interaction. In these cases, elderly learners need to acknowledge both the potential and limitations of their experience, understand what they have learned from

their experience, and develop coping behaviors for new experiences.

Adult learners are usually more motivated, goal-oriented, and decisive about what content they want in their classes; they can determine what information they need and what options are available to them for getting that knowledge. In most cases, elders lack the pragmatic goals and the awareness about learning opportunities so that they need supervision in the planning of programs.[13]

Learning Activities. The person-centered learning of geragogy promotes self awareness and expression, enjoyment of aloneness and togetherness, and acceptance and adaptation to change. These learning outcomes for elders can be developed through a communication curriculum that emphasizes personal and social skills. These skills take the form of individualized objectives which are designed for elders. Andragogy is more task-oriented; it stresses problem-centered activities where learners accomplish prescribed solutions and actions (p. 49). Elders often do not have skills required to solve problems directly, but they can learn to use persons, agencies, and processes that will assist them in getting problems solved by others.

This example about the resources of adults and elders in solving an unpaid medical bill demonstrates the differences in the capacity of the two populations in solving this problem. Most adults have good health, sufficient mobility, and literacy so they can phone an agency, visit a professional, fill out forms, secure a loan, contact a banker, and eventually manage to defer the payment of the medical bill. However, an elderly person cannot solve the problem this simply. Instead many cannot drive, cannot understand the bureaucratic language of government forms, feel that loans are disgraceful, fear professionals like lawyers and bankers, cannot read

the explanation clearly, or cannot understand or hear the response of a person on the other end of the phone. In many circumstances the physical and social liabilities of elders make them unable to solve problems themselves.[14] A person-oriented approach to learning teaches elders to recognize their own limitations. If they do not have skills to solve problems, it provides them with the knowledge to contact others who can help them. The degree of dependency of elders makes problem-centered learning impractical but person-centered instruction is realistic for them.

Curricular Goals and Objectives

Geragogy incorporates both instrumental and expressive learning objectives.[15] Instrumental knowledge involves external and future-oriented learning; it should help elders plan for change, adjust to new situations, and cope with unexpected changes associated with old age. Expressive learning is immediate and internal knowing which elders make use of in self awareness, personal enrichment, and time usage. While these types of learning are differentiated in the research, geragogy programs should include both types of learning in the planning of its objectives to encourage learning for enjoyment and for adaptation.

Some literature about elders divides this population into three groups --mature adults, young-old, and old-old.[16] The categories divide according to age but recognize that sometimes elders belong in a younger or older category when their situation is distinctly better physically, socially, or psychologically than their cohorts. In general mature adults include those from fifty-five to sixty-five who remain relatively vigorous, mobile, psychologically alert, live independently, and enjoy activities common to other adults. Most mature adults can be served effectively by educational programs of andragogy. The young-old are persons sixty-five to seventy-five

who share some impairments in health, sociability, education, and mobility. Finally, the old-old are persons seventy-five and older who have limited education, frequent illness or chronic disabilities, psychological and sociological impediments, and restricted mobility. Whereas many of the young-old live in their own homes and remain somewhat independent, many of the old-old live in nursing, retirement or daycare facilities.

Geragogy programs can serve both the young-old and the old-old, but the learning objectives differ for these two groups of olders. The objectives for the young-old might be suited for programs presented in the community, churches, senior centers or public places. Programs for the old-old are likely to be presented in nursing, retirement, or daycare centers where elders reside.

The objectives described in this essay focus on both instrumental and expressive learning of a communication curriculum. A program centering on communication is warranted because such skills as listening, speaking, problem solving, and interaction are fundamental to the needs elders have to integrate, adjust, interact, and socialize.[17] Communication skills enhance life satisfaction and promote better coping skills.[18] Field advocates programs where elders can learn oral expression, problem solving, and social interaction.[19] Carmichael concludes that communication is central to the recognition of the potential and limitations of elders.[20] These curricular objectives develop three communicative skills in relation to the young-old and the old-old.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF GERAGOGY

GENERAL GOALS	OBJECTIVES: Young-Old	OBJECTIVES: Old-Old
To develop skills in oral expression.	1. To determine what a person likes and dislikes about the communicative behavior of others. 2. To understand how to be a good listener. 3. To learn to present one's beliefs and attitudes when they are different from others. 4. To understand the kinds of communicative behaviors that enhance self-expression and those that impede self-expression.	1. To become aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses as a communicator. 2. To learn to compensate for impairments of voice, hearing, or mobility. 3. To use the phone or writing more effectively to express one's own needs. 4. To become aware of what things you say and do that others especially admire or appreciate or that they dislike.
To develop skills in social interaction.	1. To initiate communication with those whom you usually do not speak. 2. To contact people who can provide opportunities for interaction. 3. To understand how to use personal experience to help others.	1. To learn to help others and to accept their help when you need it. 2. To express self in a way that you can be understood by others. 3. To understand how one can communicate more fully non-verbally.

To develop skills in problem solving.	1. To define what your problems are. 2. To recognize what problems you can solve and which ones require the assistance of others. 3. To learn to use your personal assets and skills to help others. 4. To learn to use the resources available to help elders in the community.	1. To solve problems associated with physical impairments of sight, hearing, and mobility. 2. To identify what your problems are and understand more about the process of aging and the inevitability of change. 3. To learn to use resources available to the person in his or her living environment.

The objectives for both groups should encourage them to maximize their potential and compensate for their limitations. Specific teaching aids are available in various sources.

Geragogy as a concept of instruction focuses on the young-old and the old-old and attempts to recognize their uniqueness of education, sex, sociability, and health by utilizing instructor-directed learning, supervised decision making, and person-centered activities. The learning objectives emphasize communication and include skills related to oral expression, social interaction, and problem solving. Even though the concept of geragogy could be adapted to all types of subject matter, communication skills seem to be among the ones most needed by populations of elders.

Footnotes

[1]The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy (New York: Association Press, 1970), ch. 3. Future references from this source appear in parentnasis after the material from the source. Knowles elaborates on this approach in Self-directed Learning (New York: Association Press, 1975) and "Adult Learning Process: Pedagogy and Andragogy," Religious Education, 22 (March-April, 1977), 202-210.

[2]The derivation of this word is taken from the appendix on root words in The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970). Although the term has been used in Europe, the concept has not been used in this country. Jacques Lebel hypothesizes that the concept has utility but fails to develop methods, objectives, or curriculum in "Beyond Andragogy to Gerogogy," Lifelong Learning: The Adult Years (May 1978), 16 ff.

[3]G. van Enchevort of Amersfoort, Nederlands develops the concept in 1971.

[4]Judith Murphy and Carol Florio, "Older Americans: Facts and Realities," in The New Old, ed. Ronald Gross, Beatrice Gross and Sylvia Seidman (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday Books, 1978), pp. 50-55.

[5]Lotte Marus, "Ageing and Education," in The Social Challenge of Ageing, ed. David Hohman (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978), p. 128.

[6]Louis Harris & Associates, "Myths and Realities for Older Americans," in Gross, Gross, and Seidman, pp. 100-102. See also Marie Marshall Fuller and Cora Ann Martin, The Older Women (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1980), pp. 5-8.

[7]Fuller and Martin, pp. 31-34; and Martha Keys, "The Elderly Majority: Unique Resources and Unique Needs," Generations, 4 (August 1980), 35 ff.

[8]Robert C. Atchely, The Social Forces in Later Life (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1972), pp. 77-97.

[9]Gordon J. Aldrige, "Lifelong Education and Aging: Opportunities for Communication," in Communication and Aging, ed. Herbert J. Oyer and E. Jane Oyer (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1976), ch. 11.

[10]Atchley, ch. 6; and Richard A. Kalish, Late Adulthood: Perspectives on Human Development (Monterrey, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1975).

[11]R. Cavan, "Self and Role Adjustment during Old Age," in Human Behavior and Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach, ed. Arnold Rose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), pp. 527-528; and Vern L. Bengston, The Social Psychology of Aging (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), pp. 35-37.

[12]Harry R. Moody, "Education and the Life Cycle: A Philosophy of Aging," in Introduction to Educational Gerontology, ed. Ronald H. Sherron and D. Barry Lumsden (Washington: Hemisphere Publishing, 1978), p. 31.

[13]D. Barry Lumsden and Ronald Sherron, "Contemporary Approaches to Planning Educational Programs for Aging Adult Learners," in Sherron and Lumsden, pp. 93-104.

[14]R. P. Hiemstra, "Continuing Education for the Aged: A Survey of Needs and Interests," Adult Education (Winter 1972), 100-109.

[15]Carroll A. Londoners, "Instrumental and Expressive Education: A Basis for Needs Assessment and Planning," in Sherron and Lumsden, pp. 78-79.

[16]Max Kaplan, Leisure: Lifestyle and Lifespan (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1979), ch. 2, and Bernice L. Neugarton, ed. Middle Age and Aging (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968).

[17]Rosemary B. Lubinski, "Why So Little Interest in Whether or Not Old People Talk: A Review of Recent Research on Verbal Communication Among the Elderly," International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 9 (1978-1979), 237-245.

[18]K. A. Conner et al., "Social Interaction and Life Satisfaction: An Empirical Assessment," Journal of Gerontology, 34 (January 1979), 116-121.

[19]Minna Field, The Aged, the Family and the Community (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 182-185 and 197-198.

[20]Carl W. Carmichael, "Communication and Gerontology: Interfacing Disciplines, Western Journal of Speech Communication (Spring 1976), 121-129.

[21]Janice Schuetz, "Lifelong Learning: Communication Education for the Elderly," Communciation Education, 29 (January 1980), 33-41; "Communication Instruction and Aging," 30 (January 1981), 89-91; and Improving Lifelong Learning Through Communication and Bibliography for Communication and Lifelong Learning (Washington, D.C. ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1981).